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Portsmouth Fire Destroys 3 Piers, Heavily Damages 3 Small Vessels

By HARRY NASH

PORTSMOUTH (AP) — Three dilapidated old piers were destroyed and three small unmanned vessels damaged heavily by a fire that raged out of control for several hours early Thursday.

Coast Guard cutters and commercial tugs battled the blaze from the Elizabeth River as Portsmouth firemen, handicapped by inadequate water and shifting winds, fought the flames ashore.

The piers, Portsmouth's only port facilities, were owned by the Virginia State Ports Authority. One pier was leased to Tolchester Lines, Inc., which operates excursion vessels. Another pier was leased to Diamond Construction Co. The third pier, which had been dismantled, was vacant.

Tolchester and Diamond spokesmen were unable to give firm loss estimates but a Tolchester spokesman said his firm's losses were "in the high hundreds of thousands of dollars."

Assistant Fire Chief Clarence W. George said the fire, of undetermined origin, was discovered aboard the former Chesapeake Bay ferry Accomac shortly before midnight. The flames spread rapidly to the piers and other vessels, and were not brought under control until 3:30 a.m.

Tolchester General Manager G. T. Jones estimated damage to the Accomac, which was being converted to an excursion steamer, at approximately $300,000.

Two other vessels at the Tolchester pier were damaged heavily. They are a former Navy tank landing ship, 327 feet long, and a former Navy landing vessel, 119 feet long, both under conversion to freighters.

These two vessels were pulled away from the pier and into the river by tugs. Also damaged was a 65-foot excursion vessel owned by Tolchester Diamond Construction Co. used its pier for dead storage of machinery and construction equipment.

Ex-Sen. Benton Talks With Nikita

MOSCOW (AP) — William Benton, chairman of the board of Encyclopedia Britanica, conferred with Premier Khrushchev Thursday, then left for Paris.

The former U.S. senator from Connecticut would only say that he and Khrushchev talked about international affairs. He arrived May 18 at the invitation of the Soviet-American Friendship Society.

The piers were built 64 years ago by the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, which sold them, with 65 acres of adjacent undeveloped land, to the State Ports Authority for $300,000 two years ago.

A ports authority spokesman said the piers were in an advanced state of dilapidation. He said they were a total loss but covered by insurance.

Diamond Construction Co. paid $360 per month and Tolchester $240 per month for the piers they rented from the ports authority on a month-to-month lease basis.

The Tolchester pier was 800 feet long and 65 feet wide, the Diamond pier 415 feet long and 76 feet wide, and the vacant pier 804 feet long and 74 feet wide. The Tolchester and Diamond piers had warehouses; the vacant pier a storage shed.

Three Coast Guardsmen were overcome by smoke temporarily while fighting the fire.

Asst. Chief George said "the whole side of the ferry (the Accomac) was burning and the fire was jumping over to the north wall of the warehouse when we got there."

There was only one fire hydrant at the scene, George said, and his men could not get enough pressure from it. "We had to go overboard for water," he said, "but the only place we could park the pumper was right at the end of the warehouse. When the fire came back, we had to move the truck or it would have burned up."

Firemen strung hoses almost to the end of the pier but had to retreat, losing two hose lines as they fell back.

"The fire just came under the pier and over the top of us," George said. "We had to get out of there in a hurry."

OPEN MEMORIAL DAY 10 A.M. to 10 P.M.

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